

# Northumbria Research Link

Citation: Giddings, Bob (2008) Public squares as a means of integrating economy, environment and society in British city centres. In: Sustainable Building World Conference, 21 September - 25 September 2008, Melbourne.

URL:

This version was downloaded from Northumbria Research Link:  
<http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/1306/>

Northumbria University has developed Northumbria Research Link (NRL) to enable users to access the University's research output. Copyright © and moral rights for items on NRL are retained by the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. Single copies of full items can be reproduced, displayed or performed, and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided the authors, title and full bibliographic details are given, as well as a hyperlink and/or URL to the original metadata page. The content must not be changed in any way. Full items must not be sold commercially in any format or medium without formal permission of the copyright holder. The full policy is available online: <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/policies.html>

This document may differ from the final, published version of the research and has been made available online in accordance with publisher policies. To read and/or cite from the published version of the research, please visit the publisher's website (a subscription may be required.)



**Northumbria  
University**  
NEWCASTLE



**UniversityLibrary**

# PUBLIC SQUARES AS A MEANS OF INTEGRATING ECONOMY, ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIETY IN BRITISH CITY CENTRES

Bob GIDDINGS DPhil<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of the Built Environment, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK,  
[bob.giddings@unn.ac.uk](mailto:bob.giddings@unn.ac.uk)

Keywords: public space, economic activity, society, privatisation, sustainable development

## Summary

Sustainable Development is invariably epitomised by economy, environment and society represented as three equal sized rings in symmetrical interconnection. This assumes a separation, even autonomy, and detracts from the fundamental connections. Much debate is now centred on how to integrate these sectors, rather than seeking trade-offs between them. Up to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, public squares, offered clear examples of this integration as they are representative of the values of the society that created them. There are numerous examples from different time periods in a variety of cultures. In the second half of the 20th Century, British cities experienced increasing competition for space, which partly led to domination by market economies. As city centres became commodities, more devices were employed to attract consumers. One of the most significant was the indoor shopping centre. As malls were constructed over city streets, increasingly public space became privatised. The public sector is now experiencing substantial decline and the balanced model of economy, environment and society has been grossly distorted. Social capital may be a means of regaining equilibrium. This paper will demonstrate the significance of squares in sustaining vibrant communities; and consider mechanisms for their re-introduction as a means of contributing to the integration of economy, environment and society.

## 1. Economy, Environment and Society

Sustainable Development is generally represented by the following diagram:

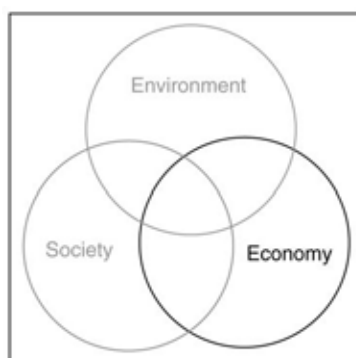
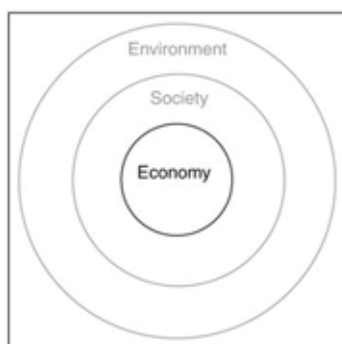


Figure 1 Common three-ring view of sustainable development

The model has a conceptual simplicity. By encouraging the classification of impacts into three convenient categories, it makes analysis more straightforward. Often sustainable development is presented as aiming to bring the three together in a balanced way, reconciling conflicts. If they are seen as separate, as the model implies, different perspectives can give priority to one of them. This view risks approaching and

tackling issues of sustainable development in a compartmentalised manner. The separation detracts from the fundamental connections between economy, environment and society. It leads to assumptions that trade-offs can be made between the three sectors, such as the notion that poor environmental quality does not matter if the economy is strong (Neumayer, 1999). In most debates either the environment or the economy is given priority, and one of the effects of the three sector separation is to encourage a technical solutions. With environmental issues, this approach suggests that provided pollution control, lower resource use, greenhouse gas trading etc. are resolved, then environmental sustainability is on track. Technical solutions in the economy, such as changing interest rates, benefits or taxation are seen as ways to move the economy towards sustainable development. They are attractive to some as they can be introduced quickly; but neither these measures nor the technical environmental solutions involve a fundamental examination of the relationship between economy, environment and society. A sectoral approach can divert attention from asking questions that are important to analysing the essence of sustainable development, such as those about the nature of society. The wider social matters often disappear from the sustainable development agenda. It is partly a quantitative versus qualitative debate. Economy and environment have sufficient quantitative factors as shown by the technical solutions, that neglecting the qualitative issues may not appear to be particularly harmful. Whereas society is predominantly about qualitative issues. It is the same dilemma that has plagued numerous research agendas – quantitative factors are just easier to identify and measure. It is hardly surprising that Prime Minister Thatcher infamously stated that ‘There is no such thing as society’. Political reality always gives primacy to the economy, and treats environment and society as resources to be exploited. By contrast, it could be argued that in material reality, the economy is dependent on society and the environment (Daly, 1992; Rees, 1995; Wackernagel and Rees, 1996). Society embraces a multitude of actions and interactions that encompass human life. Without society, humans would not survive as their very existence, in both evolutionary terms and in the present, is based on social interaction. In addition, human activity takes place within the environment, which provides the source of much culture and leisure. Art and spiritual beliefs, and most of science and technology, draw from the environment. Although some human needs are met through the production of commodities, many are met by other activities that take place partly or wholly outside what is described as the economy (Langley and Mellor, 2002). A more accurate representation of the relationship between economy, environment and society could be a pattern in which economy is nested within society, which in turn is nested within the environment.



*Figure 2 Nested view of sustainable development*

Placing economy in the centre does not mean that it should be seen as the hub around which the other sectors and activities revolve. Rather it is a subset of the others and is dependent upon them. Human society depends on the environment, while the economy depends on society and the environment. A key issue for sustainable development is the integration of different actions and sectors, taking a holistic view and overcoming barriers between disciplines. The nested model, rather than the three-ring model, encourages a conceptual outlook sympathetic to integration. Both models are simple representations that imply one economy, one environment and one society; assuming that each sector is a unified entity. This is, of course, a further abstraction. There are a multitude of economies, environments and societies at different spatial scales. The simplified approach risks ignoring the richness and multi-layeredness of reality.

## 2. Dominance of Economy

As the Labour Government (1997 to date) has followed the Conservative Government (1979-1997) in abandoning Keynesian and social democratic policies in favour of neo-liberalism in social and economic policies, there has been an identifiable shift in priorities from meeting social needs to responding to the needs of capital. Thus, there is a clear discontinuity between environmental and social policies on the one

hand, and economic policies on the other. The private sector is tightening its grip on city development, directing the character and priorities for development, and basing its decisions on maximising profitability. Ironically, the public sector gatekeepers, who are supposed to be protecting cities by applying environmental policy, are reduced to supporting the private sector. They are striving to attract investors, support property development and increasingly encourage the private provision of services.

Modern landmarks in British cities often reflect the values of the private sector and market forces. Traditionally, the symbols of society, such as town hall and library, stood out from the surrounding built fabric. However, the public sector is now experiencing substantial decline and the balanced model of economy, environment and society has been grossly distorted by the domination of market economics. Thus, there is now competition between commercial buildings, as to which can dominate the city. They are invariably large and anonymous, connecting neither with the community nor with the traditional built fabric, as they lack identity with place. Bookchin (1995) has argued that where there is a loss of city-ness in favour of global commercialism, there is a parallel loss of citizenship. Active citizenship is discouraged and replaced by the role of consumer. Power is concentrated in the hands of large companies, and government largely acts in their favour. Smith's (2002) case that the speed and scope of development is mainly driven by property developers with no interests within a specific city, so that the urban scale and appearance is actually defined by the needs of capital, remains valid.

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, people lost much of their community perspective and became individual and nuclear family orientated. The growth of technology, such as home entertainment and cars as the primary means of transport, generated much fragmentation and retreat into the private domain. This was reflected at city scale by the decline of the public realm and privatisation of public space. As city centres have become commodities, more devices have been employed to attract consumers. One of the most significant is the indoor shopping centre - advertised to provide all the necessary retail outlets in one location and offering protection from the elements. Malls are frequently constructed over city streets to preserve the illusion of the public domain, whereas in fact the whole development is privately controlled. Arguably even more insidious, has been the colonisation of squares and pavements. While public space should allow citizens to sit and socialise, increasingly this can only be done as a consumer as all the seats are owned by cafes, bars and restaurants.



*Figure 3 Cafes colonise public squares*

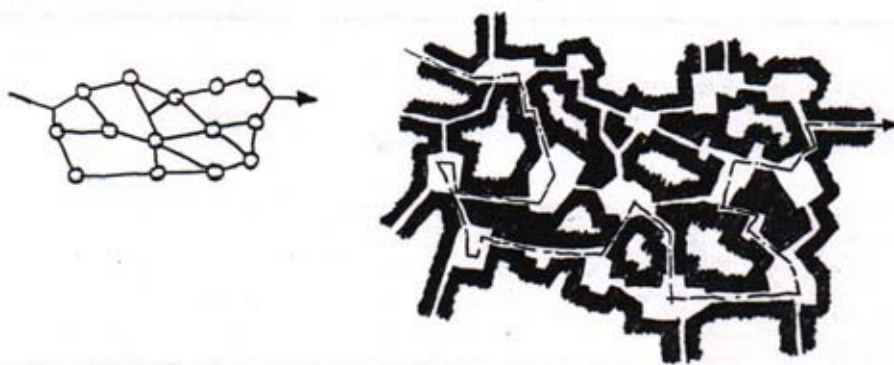
In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, British cities experienced increasing competition for space, which partly led to domination by market economies. Public space was reduced to the most direct means of accessing commercial and retail premises; while national and global capital generated buildings that did not respond to the special characteristics of each city. The pattern of urban form in cities changed dramatically. Appleyard (1981) notes that the greatest transformation in cities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was from the city containing largely walkable spaces, to the onslaught of spaces designated for the sole use of the automobile. Both Appleyard (1981) and Tibbalds (1992) highlight that cities have become scarred by major road networks, invariably leaving wounds or gashes through the urban fabric. The insertion of new roads occupy large areas of land, fragment and blight neighbourhoods, destroying local social interchange and often leaving an excess of uncared-for, left-over space, vacant sites, temporary car parks and buildings facing the wrong way. Tibbalds (1992) states that such spaces are ugly and unpleasant and have lost the human scale,

which is vital to successful urban areas. The Urban Task Force (1999) highlights that British cities have tolerated a lazy over-use of off-the-peg designs and layouts, allowing highway and traffic requirements to dominate urban layouts, as well as allowing developments that undermine the coherence and viability of cities, without giving careful thought to the effects on the logical hierarchy and balance of the whole urban structure. Traditionally cities were composed of blocks of buildings that defined squares and streets. The so-called comprehensive redevelopment schemes of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century tended to destroy this familiar and successful urban form. Paradoxically, the configuration of developments and space for motor vehicles that replaced it, actually reduced ground level building density - while ever larger areas of external space became neglected, left-over and unusable by society.

### 3. Compact Cities

It has been asserted for many years that the growth of the internet, telecommunications and global economics, has meant that people can live and work anywhere; and therefore the city does not have the significance that it occupied in the past. Some would even say that place no longer matters. This notion is counter-intuitive, but more importantly the evidence does not support it. It is true that there has been an outward migration from many cities, as people have been seeking their rural idyll away from noise and the fear of crime. Yet, at the same time, there has been unprecedented residential development in the centres of numerous cities. Moreover, although some people live miles from the city, they do not lose their connection with it. The city is still the heart of culture and society for them, as they return in the evenings and weekends for entertainment and social interaction. Gillen (2005) is one of a new breed of consultant researchers, who have concluded that the city has significance as a necessary physical hub for people whose work patterns are becoming increasingly orientated around technology-based networks. It is clear from this work that human beings need interaction that cannot be satisfied with email and video links. Meeting people, even casually for discussion, is essential to maintain a good psychological balance. It may be for these reasons that there has been a recent increase in the number of policy documents proposing improvements in the design of cities (eg. CABI, 2004; CABI, 2006; CABI, 2007; English Partnerships, 2007). However, these documents do not tackle the deep-rooted trends that undermine socio-economic quality and the environmental sustainability of urban life.

Thomas and Cousins (1996) state that the initial impression of walkable city is its concentration of activities. Lozano (1990) states that the urban form of traditional cities is rooted in pervasive factors that shape physical organizations and spaces. It has a tightly clustered pattern, with marketplace and trade streets. Often two centres of power (political and religious), and countless social and cultural institutions, such as town hall, theatre, museum and university. Cities that fall into this category tend to have a compact core and an organic system of streets and squares.



*Figure 4 Organic System of Streets and Squares*

Generally, as Alberti (1475) recognized, the organic layout tends to be most applicable to cities of variable terrain. The curving pattern of the organic street system is appreciated for the aesthetic advantages the curved vistas provide, by reducing the chance of monotony, and increasing the opportunity of surprise as suddenly a particular square appears. Norberg-Schulz (1971) holds much the same viewpoint, stating that in traditional cities, oblique angles and curved lines created closed perspective that enliven the experience of being there.



According to Lozano (1990), traditional cities are responses to the various factors that govern and influence form. He states that traditional cities have been consistently shaped by their location and morphology. They originate from places where human beings meet and trade, live and find recreation. There is substantial support among urban scholars for the traditional compact city. Jacobs (1961), Elkin et al. (1991), McLaren (1992), Hillman (1996), Thomas and Cousins (1996), Frey (1999), Girardet (2004) and Marshall (2005) all believe that the compact city has environmental advantages, and social benefits. A number of scholars have been calling for a return to the compact city, which is seen as ideal place to live and work. Such places have high population densities that can encourage social mix and interaction. This is emphasised by the Urban Task Force (1999), which states that the traditional compact city with its well designed and integrated framework plays a fundamental role in linking people and places together. The compact urban form highlights the value placed upon proximity and ease of contact between people. It gives priority to the provision of public space for people to meet and interact, to learn from one another and to join in the diversity of urban life. At its best, the compact city therefore operates as a series of interconnected networks of places and spaces devoted to making the most of human interaction. According to the Urban Task Force (1999) most compact and well-ordered cities are designed around a well-connected pattern of streets and public squares. Where the framework is fragmented and unstructured, as in so many modern urban developments, it contributes to social segregation and alienation. Gosling and Maitland (1984) note that the vision of the traditional compact city is more inspirational than factual in its message, less a model than a mirror of the community that created it. These kinds of cities can be seen as expressing themselves through thousands of small decisions taken over a long period of time. Tibbalds (1992) states that this is because they have certain essential qualities, like recognizable patterns and complexity within order. The question needs to be posed, then, as to why new development should not have the same richness, individuality, intricacy and user-friendly qualities of existing patterns? Valuable urban patterns recall their citizens' history, collective memory, values, beliefs and pride.

#### 4. Public Squares

Urban space has always been the place for the community rather than the individual and is therefore public rather than private in nature. Historically, activities that took place in urban spaces have been representative of that settlement. They were the places where the framework of society was debated and formulated, and where economic activity took place. Of all types of urban space, squares are the most representative of the values of the society that created them - the agora, forum, cloister, mosque courtyard, are all examples. Squares have deeper significance than merely functional attributes. They engender a range of human responses which start with the comfort of a protected space right up to a spiritual experience. Moreover, the continued success of a city can in part, be derived from the quality of its public spaces. If the physical, psychological and spiritual well-being of a community and visitors is partially in response to these places, then sociological factors such as crime as well as economic aspects like trade and the number of visitors, must also be affected.

The argument is that the sustainability of city centres has suffered as the number of squares has declined. The neglect of squares as a part of late twentieth century city structure was based on functional justification and associated economic viability. The trend has been the transposition of outdoor activities to indoor arenas, but has this really been in response to community demands? The case for transposition is usually made in terms of increased comfort and convenience for the public, especially in relation to protection from the climate. There are however, economic and social arguments which suggest that such transposition could equally well find its source in the privatisation of public space and increased social control by the private sector. These kinds of developments are invariably large-scale single function enterprises which are consumer led. Some are out of town, which militates against the focus of the city centre. Moreover, through a subtle selection of goods and/or services on offer coupled to a particular pricing policy, in practice such developments can segregate the community through a form of social exclusion. All of this is highly undesirable and runs contrary to almost every principle of sustainable development. At the same time collective and sustainable outdoor activity is as much under threat from the reduction of suitable spaces, as the converse notion. Activities like outdoor markets, concerts, political meetings, charitable collections, theatre, religious gatherings, sporting events such as road races and cycling, spectacles like firework celebrations or laser shows, and many more functions - all have valid roles in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. They are only hampered by the lack of suitable spaces and the unwillingness of Authority to encourage them. Secondly, does the creation of public space necessarily have to follow the rules of function and economic viability especially when the latter may be short term? The social argument is that if it acts as possibly a place for chance meetings, a focal point in the city, a recognisable landmark which offers orientation, the junction between various established routes, an entry position - especially when arriving in the centre by

underground railway - a square is justified merely on those criteria, for which value cannot be measured in monetary terms. Unwin (1909) suggests that to help the positive image of a city, its principal buildings should be offered dignity by setting out a clear open space in front of them (see Figure 5). Sitte (1889) recalls the familiar feeling of the cosy old squares. He notes that only in our memory do they loom gigantic, because in our imagination the magnitude of the psychological effect takes the place of actual size.



*Figure 5 Cathedral Square*

Yet, the interaction between these spaces and buildings, suggests an even more significant role. As each of these buildings also displays a distinct attribute of the society it represents, then each square marks the arrival at that symbol of society. Individually, every pairing of symbolic building and square can have quite a dramatic effect on the psyche of the citizens (see Figure 5). Thus, if the most prominent squares in a city contain the symbols of society, then citizens and visitors may feel re-invigorated as they move from one symbol to the next. Thus the urban spaces are defined and there is scope for external community activities; and the symbols of society are visible and accessible, with each acting as a landmark and orientation signpost. Squares celebrate the entrance to the symbolic buildings and the whole composition offers linkages and variety within a framework.

## 5. Social Capital

In Britain, local authorities are under the most sustained attack in their history. This has yet to be researched and documented but there is ample evidence that the Government is removing them from so many public services that have been fundamental to their existence, and reducing their budgets accordingly. It has already been stated in this paper that local authorities increasingly occupy a support role for the private sector. Although, there is a disturbing trend in the privatization of public space, councils are still the largest owners of land in city centres. Therefore, they have the potential to re-introduce squares as a means of integrating economy, environment and society for their communities, but their influence is diminishing. Crucial to the development of this form of sustainability is the commitment and will of the community. This may need to be found in other ways than the traditional voting for councilors. Social capital may be a means of regaining equilibrium, and developing city centre spatial structures in which all members of society can fully interact. It is a way of reclaiming public life to enable societies to prosper and for development to be sustainable. Based on collective action by different groups in the community, social capital can differ in operation. It can work with elected representatives by giving a voice to the community through a network of existing organizations. Alternatively, the community can actually undertake the work themselves. (The World Bank, 1999). For example, the proposed redevelopment of the Bullring shopping centre in Birmingham, produced an alternative scheme by the community. Although the final design still demonstrated a consumer city in terms of malls, shops, cafes and restaurants, nevertheless civic society is represented by the incorporation of several public squares. It is surely not coincidence that while many cities are reporting low public esteem due to the dominance of private sector economics and declining local authorities, Birmingham has seen a significant increase in civic involvement (Field, 2003).



*Figure 6 A two tier public square in the Bullring Birmingham*

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the theoretical relationship between economy, environment and society in sustainable development. The conclusion is that the common presentation as three rings, compartmentalises the three aspects and detracts from their connections. More damaging is the assumption that there can be trade-offs; and that poor conditions can be accepted in one sector if compensated in another sector. This can lead to a significant imbalance. In addition, quantitative issues can be given prominence over qualitative matters, because they are easier to identify, assign targets, measure and so on. Of the three sectors, society seems to suffer most in this situation. It is suggested that a nested model may be preferable, as it encourages integration.

In practice, especially since the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the economy has dominated city development. There has been an identifiable shift from meeting social needs to responding to the needs of capital, and the private sector has tightened its grip. The landmarks in British cities are now often a competition between commercial buildings. Power is concentrated in the hands of large companies and active citizenship replaced by the role of consumer. Nevertheless, people still have strong connections with cities. Even those who use the electronic revolution as a means of living and working in a rural idyll, still regard the city as the heart of culture and society. At the same time, unprecedented residential development is taking place in city centres.

There is substantial support among urban scholars for the traditional compact city. Many of them point to the environmental advantages and social benefits. The walkable city also appears to be synonymous with a high concentration of activities. This kind of city is epitomised by a tightly clustered pattern of streets and squares. These city centres have a high proportion of public space in which economy, environment and society can be brought together. Of all urban space, squares are the most representative of the values of the society that created them. Moreover, if symbolic buildings are located in the most prominent squares, citizens and visitors may feel re-invigorated as they move from one symbol to the next.

The re-introduction of these values and the re-construction of squares in particular is a public sector activity. However, local authorities are currently being subjugated by the private sector and national government. It would be excellent if they could restore public city structures but there is little sign that it is likely to happen. An alternative is social capital, as a means of reclaiming public life. It requires collective action by different groups in the community. Although difficult to organise, there are modest signs of its success in the city of Birmingham and others.



## References

- Alberti, L.B. 1475, *Ten Books on Architecture*, Tiranti reprint.
- Appleyard, D. 1981, *Livable Streets*, California University Press.
- Bookchin, M. 1995, *From Urbanization to Cities: Toward a New Politics of Citizenship*, Cassell.
- CABE. 2004, *Value of Public Space*, The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment.
- CABE. 2006, *Buildings and Spaces: Why Design Matters*, The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment.
- CABE. 2007, *Public Space Guide*, The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment.
- Daly, H. 1992, *Steady State Economics*, Earthscan
- Elkin, T., McLaren, D., Hillman, M. 1991, *Reviving the City: Towards Sustainable Urban Development*, Friends of the Earth.
- English Partnerships. 2007, *Urban Design Compendium*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. English Partnerships.
- Field, J. 2003, *Social Capital*, Routledge
- Frey, H.W. 1999, *Designing the city: towards a more sustainable urban form*, E & FN Spon.
- Gillen, N. 2005, Emerging Work Patterns and Their Implication on the Strategy and Planning of Work Environments. In Jenks, M., Dempsey, N. (eds), *Future Forms and Design for Sustainable Cities*, Elsevier, pp. 339-354.
- Girardet, H. 2004, *Cities People Planet: Liveable Cities for a Sustainable World*, Wiley-Academy
- Gosling, D., Maitland, B. 1984, *Concepts of Urban Design*, St. Martin's Press.
- Hillman, M. 1996, In favour of the Compact City. In Jenks, M., Burton, E., Williams, K. (eds), *The Compact City: A Sustainable Urban Form?* E & FN Spon, pp. 36-44
- Jacobs, J. 1961, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Penguin.
- Langley, P., Mellor, M. 2002, Economy, sustainability and sites for transformative space. *New Political Economy*, 7(1), pp. 49-66.
- McLaren, D. 1992, Compact or Dispersed? Dilution is no Solution, *Built environment*, 18(4), pp. 268-284
- Lozano, E. 1990, *Community Design and the Culture of Cities*, Cambridge University Press.
- Marshall, S. 2005, *Streets and Patterns*, Spon Press.
- Neumayer, E. 1999, *Weak Versus Strong Sustainability: Exploring the Limits of Two Opposing Paradigms*, Elgar.
- Norberg-Schultz, C. 1971, *Existence, Space and Architecture*, Studio Vista.
- Rees, W. 1995, Achieving sustainability: reform or transformation? *Journal of Planning Literature*, 9(4), pp. 343-361.
- Sitte, C. 1889, *City Planning According to Artistic Principles*, Rizzoli reprint.
- Smith, N. 2002, New Globalism, New Urbanism: Gentrification as Global Urban Strategy, *Antipode*, 34(3), pp. 427-450.
- Tibbalds, F. 1992, *Making people-friendly: improving the public environment in towns and cities*, Longman.
- The World Bank. 1999, *What is Social Capital?* PovertyNet.
- Thomas, L., Cousins, W. 1996, The Compact City: a successful, desirable and achievable urban form? In Jenks, M., Burton, E., Williams, K. (eds), *The Compact City: A Sustainable Urban Form?* E & FN Spon, pp. 53-65
- Unwin, R. 1909, *Town Planning in Practice – An Introduction to the Art of Designing Cities and Suburbs*, Benjamin Blom reprint.
- Urban Task Force, 1999, *Towards an Urban Renaissance*, E & FN Spon.
- Wakernagel, M., Rees, W. 1996, *Our Ecological Footprint*, New Society.